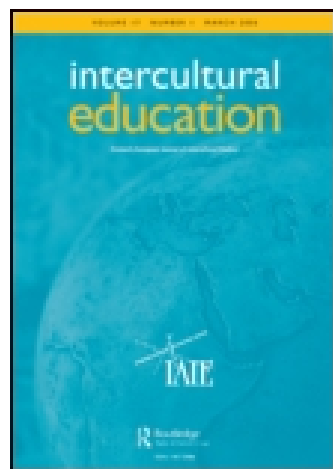


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Teaching about Islam and women: on pedagogy and the personal

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Some years after I began offering ‘Understanding Islam: religion and politics,’ at Ithaca College, I had an opportunity to take part in a roundtable discussion on the challenges of teaching such a course. The experience was instructive since it made me realize that almost everyone who teaches about Islam in the US faces similar challenges. This essay, written in an earlier version for the roundtable, is an attempt to broaden the conversation. I focus mostly on own experiences, but inasmuch as my experiences are bound up with those of my students, I also reflect on the challenges that the class as a whole has to deal with.

I should say at the outset that the students I teach are all undergraduates, mainly white and upper middle class, almost universally non-Muslim¹ and the products of a Eurocentric high school education. Almost none has taken a class on Islam before which is one reason they say they’ve signed up for mine. In my earlier essay, I spoke about these students as lacking any knowledge of Islam, but it would be truer to say that they lack any *meaningful* knowledge about Islam since, of course, they know a great deal about it by way of stereotypes. Even the rare few who have spent a semester abroad in a Muslim country can’t always tell the difference between culture and religion and bring the same sorts of confusions about Islam into the class as those who haven’t been to a Muslim country.

While I don’t know what the perfect course would look like for this constituency, I realized early on that students needed to begin a study of Islam by focusing not on the religion itself, but, on their own relationship to (‘investment in’) it. To this end, we start by studying current media representations of Islam and then take a historical detour by way of a brilliant little essay on medieval European attitudes to Islam.² We then read a short illustrated history of Islam as well as an analysis of

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contemporary Muslim societies, examine different theories of jihad as well as the idea of tolerance in Islam, engage the Qur'an's position on sexual equality, and conclude with a critique of post 9/11 politics.

In some ways, this is a lot of ground to cover even though it only gives a flavor of the issues involved in 'understanding Islam.' And, as can be expected, it places all sorts of strains on students who have to learn so many new things.

Although each class is different, most of the strains begin to surface when we come to the segments on jihad and Muslim women and it is on these issues that the class often becomes the most polarized. It may be because, by that point in the semester, learning about Islam has begun to erode the lines between 'us/ them' that students were taught to draw from an early age. Few of them, however, can remain unmoved when they discover the role of Muslim arts and sciences in the creation of 'Western civilization' and many begin to question an education that has produced their 'historical amnesia' (Said, 1997). But, while some are relieved to know that there may be a 'zero degree of separation' (in the words of one student) between 'Islam and the West,' others begin to feel anxiety on that score. The issue of violence, especially the treatment of women, allows them to redraw the imagined borders between Islam/the West, which is why I view such attempts as much as acts of condemnation as of self-preservation.

Paradoxically, however, even those students who are the most vociferous in condemning Muslim women's oppression cannot bring themselves to 'relate' (in their own words) to a group of people whom they have been taught to regard as helpless and in need of saving, by US-Americans, of course! For many, it is that ideal situation that calls forth their own liberal altruism in the role of savior and it is difficult for them to see the problems with casting themselves in that mode.

There is then the issue of what to make of someone like me who doesn't fit the image either of an oppressed Muslim woman or of the exotic 'Oriental'. Some students ascribe my 'powerful' and 'aggressive' personality to the fact that I live in the US where I enjoy the gift of freedom. Others, meanwhile, think I represent an authentic essence of Muslim-ness that can provide them personal access to other Muslims. Although this opens up crucial 'teaching moments' for me—it allows me to call attention to the tendency to brand Muslims with the 'mark of the plural'³ (Memmi, 2003)—I can't help feeling a bit objectified at the end of it all.

If teaching about Islam challenges me in unexpected ways, so does learning about Islam challenge my students. It thus seems appropriate to speak now about the class.

Sooner or later, it runs into problems because students get caught up in a series of tensions that result from some overlapping but contradictory urges: wanting to learn about Islam but being suspicious of some of the stuff they learn, specially if it casts Islam and Muslims in a positive light; keeping an open mind by not judging the course materials and in fact rushing to judge them; and wanting to learn about Islam from Muslims but then rejecting what Muslims say about Islam on the grounds that it is too partisan.

As I said earlier, the reason most students give for taking my class is that they know nothing about Islam and want to learn about it. Of course, the 'nothing' they

know is deeply embedded, both in the sense that they actually don't know much about Islam and in the sense that whatever they do know is in the form of 'negative' knowledge.⁴ As they find out, however, sincerity can't get them happily through the class since learning about Islam invariably means unlearning some things about themselves and that is a painful process.

In part, it's painful because most students have been taught to think about the relationship between 'Islam and the West,' as a zero-sum game and it's hard for them to learn positive things about Islam without experiencing some loss of face. After all, what does it say about an educational system and, by extension, the 'West,' for them not to know some simple things about Islam? They are shocked, for instance, to read about the intellectual and scientific innovations of early Muslim societies, or to find out that the Qur'an never uses the word 'jihad' for war, or that Muslims view the 'greater jihad' as a struggle against the self, not a war against the 'infidels.'

Although many students take these discoveries in stride, others are clearly unsettled and they begin to fault some of the texts, particularly those written by Muslims. Students who identify as secular often start to express discomfort with 'categorical' statements about Islam even if these statements are descriptive (Muslims invented x) because they view such statements as being biased. More to the point, they feel such statements are a marketing gimmick meant to 'sell' them Islam unawares. Ironically, these are often the same people who distrust the media's representations of Islam and who argue that only the group concerned can best represent itself.

Then, too, some of the students who begin the course rather euphorically because a Muslim is teaching it start to get uncomfortable with my speaking about Islam authoritatively. In fact, some have even said that they would rather learn about Islam (and religion in general) from a person who doesn't have a stake in it, like an atheist. In effect, the same students who suspect that Islam is being 'sold' to them also feel that it should be made more palatable to them! In other words, the site from which Muslims speak must reflect the needs of the non-believers.

This isn't true of all students, of course. Those who have had a religious upbringing, even if they are not actively practicing believers, are often the most able to 'understand Islam.' At a minimum, they are familiar with religion and, while some of them may reject its institutionalized aspects, they can understand such concepts as revelation, the sacred nature of scripture, and so on.

As a result, one of the divisions that appears in the class is not just between some students and myself but, also, amongst the students. Typically, it appears in the form of the binary between rationalism/irrationalism with many secular students laying claim to rationality and even a higher order morality. In spite of that, however, the very fact that there is so little in their theoretical repertoire on which secular students can draw to understand Islam means that often they are the ones who stretch themselves the most intellectually.

Perhaps it is unavoidable that the class should be so fraught. Not only are the tensions it produces inevitable but they manifest the eternal pull between desire and fear. Thus, on the one hand, students *want* to encounter the Otherness of Islam. On the other hand, when they do, they don't quite know what to make of it; the other

turns out not to be quite so different after all, or the encounter brings into focus the internal fragilities of the self, or both things happen in tandem.

What fascinates me most about this process is not so much the Othering of Islam (which I view as a testimony to the enduring hold of Orientalism). Rather, what interests me is why so many children of a super-power feel so vulnerable in their encounter with it. My own sense is that it is because most US-Americans are alienated from the world and that this psychic distance is a function of their own overwhelming power and privilege. It is this distance, I believe, that keeps them from developing the empathy necessary for truly engaging the Other.

Meanwhile, my dilemma is that even as I desire this encounter, I also fear it. In my earlier essay, I wrote that I have too much invested in the class to 'allow' it to fail. Even though I consciously resist assuming the burden of representation, it is hard not to feel implicated if a class doesn't work. There is some loss of my sense of self since, to me, Islam is not just a subject but the very basis of my own subjectivity. But, perhaps, the issue is even larger than that. For years, I have not taught my Middle East course because I couldn't create in my students the respect that I believe the subject deserves. To put a book like *Orientalism* in the hands of students and to hear them say year after year that it was too boring, or that Edward Said couldn't be trusted because he was a Muslim (!), or that they didn't have the time to read it, eventually sapped my will to teach the course.

I don't want to do that with my Islam course and so my ongoing pedagogical challenge is to try and figure out if one can inhabit a subject from the inside and yet treat it as just another item in the 'marketplace of ideas.' If one cares too deeply and too much about something, can one teach about it knowing that one risks failure? When I put it this way to Naeem Inayatullah, a long-time colleague who is adept at taking spectacular risks in the classroom, he chided me. To him, failure is an ontological posture. That being so, he believes the real challenge is to figure out 'whether one can inhabit a subject from the inside and still treat it as open.' That was three years ago and I can't say I know the answer.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. So far, I've had only one Muslim student in my Islam course and she dropped it partly because I suspect she didn't want to confront me publicly over our different approaches to Islam.
2. Please see Robert Southern (1962).
3. The phrase is Albert Memmi's (2003). By this he meant the tendency to see the colonized as a homogenous, faceless, whole.
4. I would like to thank the editors for suggesting this term.

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